



Journaling the Pandemic

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*"The world is changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air.
Much that once was is lost."*

The Elven Queen, Lady Galadriel.[1]

One thing is certain. The COVID-19 pandemic has created havoc in our lives and has changed us in ways we could never imagine. We found ourselves at home trying to keep sane in a world which has suddenly gone insane on us. All of us have witnessed something similar on social media, in public, or in our personal relationships. Everyone has their own way of reacting to this pandemic and its emotional and psychological complexities. For this reason, a Facebook group titled Journaling the Pandemic has been created to encourage members to share with each other art contributions whether in writing, poetry, paintings, drawings or photography with its principal aim being to document the members' experiences during the pandemic.

I am the administrator of this group; as a former nurse and a PhD candidate with a special interest in medical humanities, I encourage members to post relevant works of art inspired by the current situation. The idea of this group occurred to me after I carried out research on the collective

narrative of the Spanish 1918 pandemic. When multitudes of subjects are affected at once by painful events that disrupt secure frameworks of normality, subjective specificity is hard to find. The silence that surrounds the 1918 pandemic may not have been due only to the normal erasure of selective memory, but "there may also have been a refusal or inability to describe a trauma that might still have haunted its survivors." [2] Perhaps the flu overwhelmed language in ways that war at the time did not. For this reason, few references to the 1918 pandemic exist in literature, popular culture, or even in history books. [3] Therefore, in the still uncertain grip of a new global COVID-19 pandemic, it matters now more than ever that we hold on to the stories we narrate.

Members of the Facebook have eagerly responded and within three weeks the group reached over 500 members and amassed a good number of posts. Poems penned to express feelings of isolation, baking ideas, and a shared connectedness were posted. Victoria Calleja, an English teacher, shared a

poem capturing the feelings of many during self-isolation (Figure 1).

Doris Scerri, a mother of four and grandmother of two, penned her feelings of distress and hope for freedom once this is over (Figure 2). Young teens also shared their experiences through poetry and how the pandemic is affecting their social lives away from school and friends.

When we are stricken and cannot bear our lives any longer, some of us find solace and meaning in painting. Being an artist and being in quarantine, people have always worked wonders out of limitation, privation, and boredom. They illuminate the universal through the tiny aperture of the deeply personal. The result is often beautiful works of art as can be illustrated in these paintings (Figures 3-7).

Fear of the unknown and global pandemics are not the perfect combination. Our lives have dramatically changed and we had to adjust to a new normal overnight. But life is mostly what you make of it, and during this stressful time our weaknesses can often be transformed into our biggest opportunities. Blogger and writer, Jessica Micallef shares her experience with the group. In her blog she writes:

“I spent the first few weeks of my self-enforced lockdown feeling guilty and, I’ll say it, useless. While I’ve never really been affected by FOMO, I have always been driven by the need to achieve. My social media newsfeed has had a constant stream of images, videos and articles by and about people who have used this time to achieve their fitness goals, learn a new skill or take up a new hobby. Shakespeare, one post said, wrote King Lear during the plague. King Lear. Let me say that again: KING LEAR. And here I was, finishing my work day feeling stressed and exhausted from the running commentary about contagion and hygiene inside my head, letting my eyes rest on the kitchen counter and the thawing chicken waiting to be

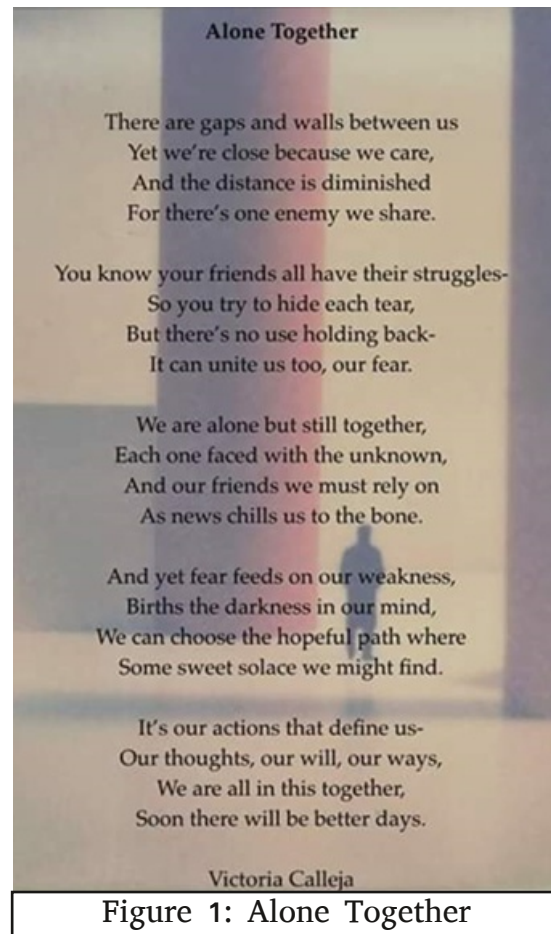


Figure 1: Alone Together

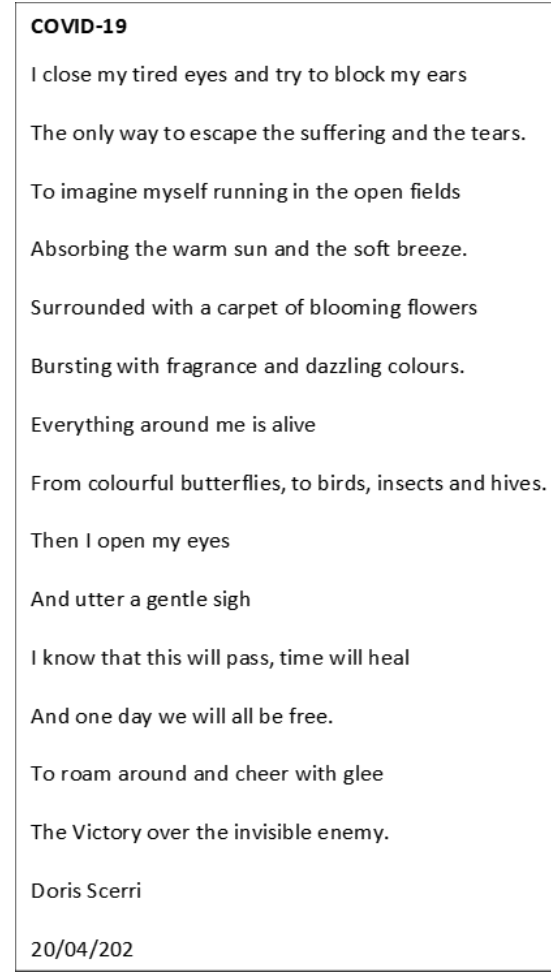


Figure 2: COVID-19

cooked, the load of blankets in the washing machine waiting to be hung...”[4]

After two weeks struggling through writer’s block, Jessica found inspiration. All of a sudden, she “opened a new document, got [my] formatting down and chose a working title. Last Monday, at around half past six in the morning, [I] completed my first draft.”[4]

What emerges during these fraught times is that physical documentation from ordinary people is as important as ever. “As historians, we rely on daily reports to figure out what actually happened on the ground”, claims Victoria Cain, an associate professor of history. “It really offers us insight into how society and culture worked at a time of tragedy, or crisis, or just chaos.”[5]



Figure 3: Faith by Ruth Borg



Figure 5: Flowers by Simone Fiott



Figure 4: Pomegranates by Simone Fiott

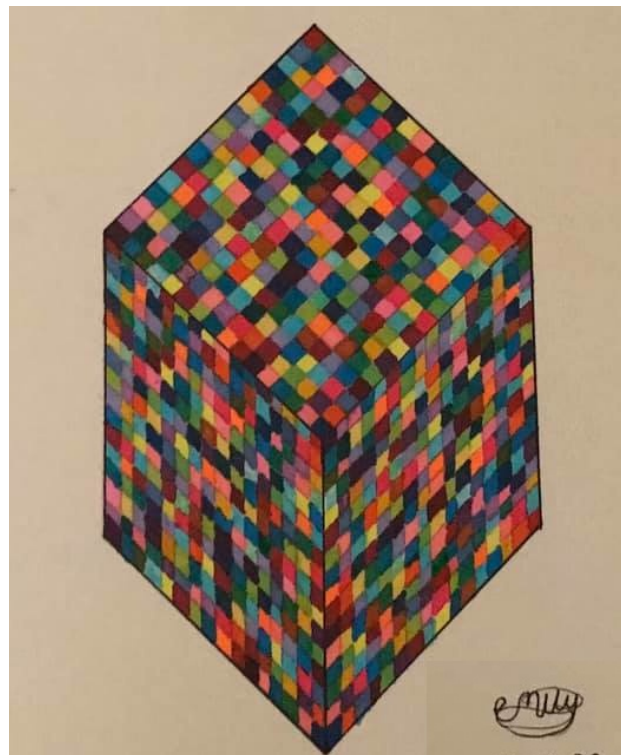


Figure 6: 3D Design by Emily Scerri



Figure 7: Ginger jar, Mandarins, and Cinnamon sticks by Emmanuel Bonnici

This collective narrative can serve as documentation for future generations and a reference point to science and history. As time unfolds, we are writing history and offering a snapshot of our life in a time that is absolutely unparalleled. It also allows people a space to deposit stresses and worries as well as inspirations and hopes.

This collective narrative will eventually present a rich portrait of how people coped

over the arc of the pandemic and of the day-to-day impacts of policy interventions. Narrative is a medium that carries and communicates the lessons of past suffering. Without narration, the past becomes abstract, and deceptively simple. Without the subjective embodiment of fact that produces meaning, narration falters. The plight of the general public provides a rich texture for a collective narrative which will reverberate across time for centuries to come.

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